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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's goal of achieving 100 percent international literacy by the year 2000 led the United Nations General assembly to proclaim 1990 as International Literacy Year. This proclamation was linked to the formulation of a plan of action to assist member states in all regions of the world to wipe out literacy by the end of the twentieth century. The goals of International Literacy Year include the following: (1) to promote better understanding internationally of the problems of illiteracy; (2) to strengthen and revitalize existing primary education programs; (3) to encourage new programs to reach adult illiterates; and (4) to promote the struggle against reverting to previous levels of illiteracy. There are a number of major international efforts to promote literacy, largely through the International Task Force on Literacy, a coalition of over 35 international nongovernmental organizations involved in adult education and literacy. UNESCO will publish a study this year arguing that unless an all-out effort is made to boost the quality of primary schooling, making it accessible to all children, and to give education renewed financial priority, the fight against illiteracy will be lost. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ERIC National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education
An Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse
Digest

International Literacy Year

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Why Designate an International Literacy Year?

More than 40 years ago, the United Nations formulated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration explicitly stated that every individual has the right to an education. At that time, it was projected that 100 percent worldwide literacy would be achieved by the year 2000. However, in 1985, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that there were 889 million illiterate people worldwide, two thirds of whom were women. Though the percentage of those classified as illiterate has declined (32 percent in 1970 as compared with 25 percent projected in 1990), the absolute number continues to grow due to the rapid increase in world population (UNESCO, 1988).

With the goal of achieving 100 percent world literacy by the year 2000 imminent, the United Nations General Assembly met in December 1987 and proclaimed 1990 to be International Literacy Year. This proclamation was linked to "a formulation of a Plan of Action to assist Member States in all regions of the world to eradicate illiteracy by the end of the century" (UNESCO, 1990, p. 1). UNESCO was invited to assume the role of lead agency in this event.

What Are the Goals for International Literacy Year?

The following have been outlined by UNESCO as the goals for International Literacy Year:

To promote better understanding internationally of the problems of illiteracy;
To help strengthen and revitalize existing primary education programs;
To encourage new programs to reach adult illiterates, especially women; and
To promote the struggle against reverting to previous levels of illiteracy.

How Will These Goals Be Realized?

UNESCO suggests the following five objectives for a successful literacy drive to accomplish the above goals. Efforts to achieve these objectives will continue through the end of this decade (UNESCO, 1988, p. 8).

Encourage governments to actively promote literacy by maintaining accurate literacy figures, accepting input from nongovernmental organizations and interested groups in formulating policy, organizing volunteers on a national level, meeting the needs of special populations, and evaluating literacy programs to determine their effectiveness.

Increase public awareness of literacy needs through media, literacy awards, literacy ambassadors (public figures, artists, writers and sports figures), theater programs, museum displays, and murals that portray literacy themes.

Increase popular participation in literacy efforts by creating partnerships between nongovernmental organizations and other interested groups such as the business community, book publishers, unions, and academic institutions. Financial participation by individuals could take the form of "voluntary taxation."

Expand cooperation and solidarity among nations by promoting dialogue and cooperative projects between developing and industrialized countries. For example, industrialized countries might contribute literacy-related technology such as mimeograph machines, books, and eyeglasses free of charge to literacy organizations in developing countries.

Increase cooperation within the United Nations system and more generally among all intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations in the struggle against illiteracy.

How Are UNESCO's Objectives Being Achieved?

There are a number of major international efforts to promote literacy, largely through the International Task Force on Literacy, a coalition of over 35 international nongovernmental organizations involved in adult education and literacy. Two offices, one in Toronto, Canada, and one in New Delhi, India, coordinate regional planning; lend assistance to the launching of local, national, and international literacy projects; and coordinate literacy promotion and activities throughout this decade.

In March 1990, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), UNESCO, and the World Bank sponsored the World Conference on Education for All, which was held in Thailand. The conference was the first such world meeting to bring together literacy providers and educators from such diverse sectors as government delegations, nongovernmental agencies, and financing organizations around the world. The conference was unique in that it emphasized dialogue and discussion of policies among the delegates rather than lectures or formal papers. These issues were focused on during the conference:

The need to teach in the mother tongue in order to accelerate the progress of education and reduce its costs.

The status of religious languages (such as classical Arabic), which must not be treated as second languages, but rather recognized for their special role in embodying culture and values.

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The success of bilingual programs that have demonstrated that initial training in the mother tongue may result in better acquisition of national or international languages (Shirley Brice Heath, personal communication, March 1990).

The 42nd meeting of the International Conference on Education was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in September 1990, to review national literacy and educational plans for United Nations Member States. The purpose of this conference was to follow up on the efforts of Member States to implement their national plans of action for literacy and education for all.

A major global project of the International Task Force on Literacy for International Literacy Year is the "Book Voyage." This project gathers and publishes testimonies of people who are newly literate. These testimonies will be passed from literacy center to literacy center throughout the world and then compiled into a volume to be published late in 1991. (See **Further Information** to obtain this document.)

In Australia, there is an effort to establish Literacy Action Coalitions. These local advocate groups promote literacy awareness, help lift the stigma attached to people with reading and writing difficulties, and expand the number of literacy programs available. There is also a national referral service to distribute literacy information (ALIO, 1990).

Japan's largest newspaper, *Yomiuri*, has set a goal of raising one yen for every illiterate person in the Asia and Pacific region (about $5 million U.S.), which will be disbursed for education programs (UNESCO, 1989).

There are International Literacy Year efforts in the United States as well. According to *U.S. Senate Report 101-196*, inadequate literacy costs the United States more than $200 billion annually in lost productivity, crime, accidents, employee errors, and extra training programs. The U.S. Congress has recently approved two bills that address illiteracy. The National Literacy Act of 1990 and The Adult Literacy and Employability Act of 1990 jointly:

Unify the efforts of existing literacy programs;

Establish a national structure to coordinate literacy programs and disseminate literacy-related information;

Enhance Federal resources for new literacy programs and methods to reach the estimated 19-23 million persons presently not being served by existing programs;

Expand public-private literacy partnerships.

Conclusion

UNESCO will publish a study this year entitled "Primary Education and Economic Recession." This study argues that unless an all-out effort is made to boost the quality of primary schooling and make it accessible to all children, and give education renewed financial priority, the fight against illiteracy will not be won. Education spending has actually declined over the last decade in half of the world's developing countries, and there are no signs of reversing this trend in the future. Unless policy makers put literacy and education higher on their national agendas, adult literacy rates, especially in the developing countries, will continue to worsen. Illiteracy among women will most likely continue to be a sensitive and challenging issue, particularly in Arab countries.

Upcoming Events

A number of conferences are being held in the United States for International Literacy Year. Some of these are listed below:

International Literacy Day
September 10: The Library of Congress and the International Reading Association will co-sponsor a symposium highlighting the events of International Literacy Year and the Year of the Young Reader. Contact International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 131, Syracuse, New York 13210.

World Literacy in the Year 2000: Research and Policy Dimensions
October 4 - 7: The Literacy Research Center, University of Pennsylvania will sponsor this invitation-only conference. Contact Daniel A. Wagner, Literacy Research Center, Graduate School Of Education, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216.

Literacy - Foundation for Development
October 9 - 30: International Monetary Fund Visitors Center, Washington D.C. Contact Robert Thar, Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1118 22nd Street N.W., Washington DC 20037.

The National Conference on Literacy.
December 3: United Nations, New York. Contact Jim Muldoon, United Nations Association of the U.S.A., 485 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6104.

Further Information

For the official newsletter of the International Literacy Year, available free of charge, write to:

International Task Force on Literacy
c/o ICAE
720 Bathurst Street, Suite 500
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2R4

To obtain more information about the Book Voyage write to:

Peter Waite
Laubach Literacy International
1320 Jamesville Avenue
P.O. Box 131
Syracuse, NY 13210

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